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Modernism/modernity, Volume 25, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 93-114
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2018.0004>



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An Edwardian Turn of Mind: Psychological Realism and Modernist Metaphysics in May Sinclair's *The Divine Fire*

Charlotte Jones

Philosophical idealism rarely figures in histories of literary modernism. Aside from Michael Bell's essay on "The Metaphysics of Modernism," which observes a coincidence between the arrival of modernism and the "collapse of idealism," surprisingly little has been written about any potential relationship between late-Victorian transcendental metaphysics and early-twentieth-century literature.¹ Stefan Collini has remarked upon how philosophical idealism, by ascribing priority to the mentally constructed nature of all phenomena, was crucial in this period for enacting the shift from a moralized nineteenth-century conception of rational, evolving "character" to a self-realizing mode of twentieth-century subjectivity, "for it was capable of offering a more coherent conceptualization of these aspirations than was readily available in the prevailing philosophical vocabulary."² Yet the ways in which philosophical idealism may have aided the conceptualization of literary modernism more broadly are often overlooked in favor of the "underlying legacy of hermeneutic suspicion" bequeathed by Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, and others, whose epistemological relativism speaks most enduringly to our current critical prioritization of fragmentation and flux over teleology and transcendence (Bell, "Metaphysics of Modernism," 10).

Some of the interconnections would, however, be illuminated by the reappraisal of one author whose work, despite the cliché, constitutes a hitherto neglected phase in the early genesis of

MODERNISM / *modernity*
VOLUME TWENTY FIVE,
NUMBER ONE,
PP 93–114. © 2018
JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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94 modernism. May Sinclair believed art and metaphysics to be inseparable. Sinclair made significant interventions in contemporary philosophical debates with *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) and *The New Idealism* (1922), and idealism was a vital intellectual background underpinning both her coinage of the phrase “stream of consciousness” in relation to literary method and the composition of her modernist masterpiece, *Mary Olivier* (1919).³ This late novel has often been interpreted through the lens of her philosophy as a text imbued with the theories of T. H. Green or, as proposed most recently, Spinoza—but its intrusive philosophical dimension is perhaps one reason for Sinclair’s ongoing marginality in modernist studies.⁴ *Mary Olivier* marks the culmination of the decades Sinclair spent working to mediate the interface between the reality of the mind and the possibility of representing it. Her writing career spanned more than thirty years, from 1897 to 1931; to more completely understand her wider influence over that period of time, in particular her importance as a nexus of philosophy and literature, we need to resituate Sinclair in a modernist genealogy which examines her innovation developmentally, from early Edwardian experiments to high modernist success.

Sinclair sought in her Edwardian fiction to integrate a revelatory encounter with idealist Absolute Forms with the incontrovertible material evidence of alternative forms of consciousness being presented by the “new psychology.” For Sinclair, idealism’s impetus for thinking about immaterial and unseen realities led to the intangible and unseen realms of the mind, and a metaphysical Absolute becomes the conduit for her psychologically realist novels to begin to imagine and represent the unconscious. In its triangulation of paradigms—philosophy, psychology, and realism—Sinclair’s fiction evidences how literature both contributed and responded to a wider shift in the construction of early-twentieth-century selfhoods. Her novels are among the first to engage with ideas about both subjectivity and its representation, before Freud was translated into English and exerting a consistent influence on writers. The argument of this article thus runs in parallel with that of George Johnson who, in *Dynamic Psychology in Modernist British Fiction*, has demonstrated the “distortions in histories of psychology” and literary modernism attendant upon the exaggeration of Freud’s impact and concomitant disregard for alternative contemporary conceptualizations of psychology such as psychical research and other second-wave psychological discourses.⁵ While Johnson focuses on retrieving these “dynamic psychologies,” this article will attempt to supplement our understanding of early modernist theories of consciousness by outlining the simultaneous influence of an idealist philosophical tradition. May Sinclair alighted on “stream of consciousness” in 1918 but before that her language of the mind was fundamentally philosophical; her Edwardian fiction attempts to explore how a philosophy of the mind might become a psychology of the unconscious.

In what follows, I will focus on this dimension of Sinclair’s work and its implications for the wider early modernist literary canon. I closely examine one of Sinclair’s Edwardian novels—*The Divine Fire* (1904)—in order to suggest some of the ways that the model of subjectivity presented there offers an innovative new approach to both the problem of consciousness and wider debates about representation during the Edwardian period. This is a debate whose implications for representational practice,

I argue, lead to the formal experimentations of literary modernism. Sinclair's lengthy and in parts sentimental Edwardian novel about genius and the commodification of literary values charts the rise of a new aesthetic constituting an early and consummate exemplification of what Robert Caserio defines as "a crucially modernist turn in intellectual tradition," the intersection of philosophy and psychology.⁶

"Little is known of this very curious & interesting animal"⁷

Sinclair is now best remembered for her review of "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson," published in *The Egoist* in April 1918, in which she inaugurated the critical vocabulary for the modernist novel by coining the literary application of the phrase "stream of consciousness." Sinclair wrote admiringly of *Pointed Roofs* (1915), *Backwater* (1916) and *Honeycomb* (1917), the three volumes of Richardson's *Pilgrimage* that had appeared thus far, that

[i]n this series there is no drama, no situation, no set scene. Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson's stream of consciousness going on and on . . .⁸

The phrase was first used by G. H. Lewes in *The Physiology of Common Life* (1860), but after William James posited the existence of a "stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life" in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), it became commonplace among philosophers and psychologists alike.⁹ What Sinclair did that was new was link the concept to literary form:

The first-hand, intimate and intense reality of the happening is in Miriam's mind, and by presenting it thus and not otherwise Miss Richardson seizes reality alive. The intense rapidity of the seizure defies you to distinguish between what is objective and what is subjective either in the reality presented or the art that presents. ("Novels of Dorothy Richardson," 59)

Yet Sinclair's likening of the description of consciousness as a "stream" to Dorothy Richardson's narrative method is too often abstracted and read out of the context of the wider essay, which is less about identifying or defining a single new literary technique than discussing the myriad attempts by writers to represent the nature of reality as it was experienced and understood in the early twentieth century. "[I]t seems to me that the first step towards life is to throw off the philosophic cant of the nineteenth century," Sinclair writes, before explaining the shift in approach required for readers to appreciate Richardson's novels:

it is absurd to go on talking about realism and idealism, or objective and subjective art, as if the philosophies were sticking where they stood in the eighties. . . . All that we know of reality at first hand is given to us through contacts in which those interesting distinctions are lost. Reality is thick and deep, too thick and too deep, and at the same time too fluid to be cut with any convenient carving-knife. The novelist who would be close to reality must confine himself to this knowledge at first hand. (57)

96 The old terms are no longer relevant for Sinclair—the modern psychological novel dismantles any distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, realism and idealism. Instead, Richardson’s style “seizes reality alive.” Sinclair’s preference for “Reality” over realism, idealism, and other such classifications is indicative; metaphysical questions about the nature of being and of reality pervade Sinclair’s fiction, which is concerned with people, their perception of and relation to the world around them—the nature of existence, knowledge, and perception. The “stream of consciousness” is but one angle of approach to these questions.

Richardson herself rejected this description of her style—“amongst the company of useful labels devised to meet the exigencies of literary criticism,” she later said, stream of consciousness “stands alone, isolated by its perfect imbecility”—but Sinclair’s association of a method for the representation of consciousness and the textual apprehension of “reality alive” captured a zeitgeist.¹⁰ The essay was reprinted almost immediately in *The Little Review*, Margaret Anderson’s avant-garde magazine, which in the interests of “making no compromise with the public taste” was at the time serializing *Ulysses*. (It would feature book one of Sinclair’s *Mary Olivier* in four consecutive issues the following year).

Sinclair was a consistently astute observer of literary trends: her perceptive *Little Review* article on “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” for example, was the first positive appreciation of T. S. Eliot’s poem, defending its novelty from those who charged the style with being “elusive,” “difficult,” and “disturbing.”¹¹ Yet she was also a consummate practitioner: her late novels *Mary Olivier* (1919) and *The Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922) use fragmentary prose to explore the interiority of the female mind in a manner akin to Richardson, Woolf, and Katherine Mansfield. It was on the strength of the stylistic innovation of these later novels that Sinclair warranted inclusion in Bonnie Kime Scott’s *The Gender of Modernism*. There, Diane Gillespie, in the entry on Sinclair, notes that she “aptly defined, enthusiastically practiced, and vigorously defended modernist innovations in fiction and poetry.”¹² Sinclair has since featured, albeit often briefly or in passing, in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers* (2010).

Attempts such as these to reintegrate Sinclair into the wider modernist canon have, however, involved a marked condensation of her oeuvre, focusing on the later novels and essays and discouraging sustained analysis of the intricacies and complexities of the *fin de siècle* and Edwardian novels with which she developed her aesthetic and rose to prominence. The decade before World War I was Sinclair’s most formative and productive. She wrote prolifically; as well as ten novels, she composed introductions to a complete new edition of the novels of the Brontë sisters for Everyman, wrote a pamphlet on “Feminism” for the Women Writers Suffrage League, and published countless reviews, essays, and short stories. Her presence on the Edwardian literary scene was considerable: her advance for *The Helpmate* (1907) totaled £1,000, and during that decade alone she published in periodicals as various as *Blackwood’s Magazine*, *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and the *English Review*. J. B. Pinker—literary agent to Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and more—relentlessly sought to represent her (Raitt, *May Sinclair*, 96).

The diversity of Sinclair's oeuvre is perhaps one of the reasons for the ongoing marginality of her status; she did not commit to a single distinctive style (despite defining "stream of consciousness," the associative logic of first person interior monologue was one of a number of approaches to representing consciousness which she adopted) and her contemporaries often lamented that she did not settle to anything long enough to perfect it. Yet such complaints ignore the fact that, as Jane Eldridge Miller observes, Sinclair was "one of the few Edwardian novelists who responded to the pressures being exerted upon the novel with formal experimentation."¹³ Sinclair's Edwardian novels are the most unappreciated of all, written before her reading of psychoanalysis, interest in political feminism and involvement in World War I, all of which have acted as the predominant contexts for scholarly reconsiderations of her work. It is from her early interest in philosophical idealism, however, that some of the earliest formal experimentations representing consciousness in the modern psychological novel result.

"The Reality I am looking for": The Return of Idealism

After nearly a century subordinate to the empiricist materialism of Hume and Mill, neo-Hegelian metaphysics began, in a late-Victorian era evacuated of religious certainty, to make something of a return. The resurgence was headed by T. H. Green, who between 1880 and 1914 was the most influential thinker to challenge both the nineteenth-century dichotomy of faith and reason and the conceptual apparatus of empiricism. Green had been an undergraduate at Balliol in the 1850s just as Darwinian theories of evolution began to erode the foundations of orthodox Christian faith; it left his generation desperate for an existential anchor and Green found his solace in a modified form of German Romantic idealism, confronting religious doubt by transforming theological issues into social ones. His *Prolegomena to Ethics*, published posthumously in 1884 and popularized by Mrs. Humphry Ward's novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888), remained extraordinarily popular into the first decade of the twentieth century. His legacy can be traced through the philosophical works of Bernard Bosanquet and F. H. Bradley, but it can also be detected in more unexpected places, such as the reformist social liberalism of L. T. Hobhouse and Herbert Asquith.

Green asserted the primacy of mind and spirit (the Hegelian *Geist*) and as such his idealism emphasized self-development and society's responsibility for helping people foster it. No word resounds more frequently or fundamentally in Green's work than "citizenship"; his idealism has been called a "civic religion," and Green himself called it a "metaphysic of morals."¹⁴ The foundational assumption of his idealism is a connected world of relations, which for him implied the existence of a single self-determining "eternal consciousness" (Green, *Prolegomena*, 73–78). The logic may seem elliptical, but that everything is connected, reasoned Green, implies that they are, in some sense, the same thing; the relationship between things presupposes the existence of the same principle in them. At the same time, he argued that the continuity of reality resides in our co-presence—to think of a sensation is to think of it as related to a perceiving mind, and as events follow each other, for us to consider them *as following* is to consider

98 them all as co-present to one another. Green used these two principles as evidence that all reality emanates from consciousness: knowledge comes from successive sensations operating on a consciousness which can hold them together, therefore consciousness does not exist before or after the sensations, but is the condition of there being sensation. And just as there must be a consciousness holding together the disparate experiences of the body, Green infers that a similar synthesizing energy must exist for the universe as a whole, which is what he termed “eternal consciousness.”

Green believed, therefore, that all individuals participate in the existence of an eternal, supra-individual subject, and thus the way we relate to other human beings becomes, by extension, the way we relate to that eternal subject—to act morally towards other people is to recognize that we are all connected. These tenets enabled a moral philosophy with the same ethical code as religion, justifying acts of duty, self-sacrifice, and social service by regarding society as a mutually dependent whole to which individuals contribute through “the self-realisation of the divine principle” within themselves (188).

There is evident in Green’s idealism a return to a degree of essentialism, a desire to see the human being not as a bundle of perceptions (as per the empiricists) or processes (the utilitarians) but as a Hegelian unity prior to and underlying individual consciousness. Green seeks to abandon not only the fragmentation of modern sensibilities, but also the deterministic Darwinian models of materialist evolution which had prevailed since the mid-nineteenth century. What makes man fundamentally different from animals, Green argues, is his self-consciousness, which “implies a principle which is not natural” (*Prolegomena*, 56). That self-consciousness, however, comes not by the acquisition of new objects or concepts, but by a process of realization of “the spiritual principle in nature” already immanent in reality.¹⁵

It was precisely the quasi-religious dimension of these “divine” and “spiritual” principles which first appealed to May Sinclair. She, like many of her contemporaries, struggled to reconcile science and religion; Green’s *Prolegomena to Ethics* was first recommended to her by Dorothea Beale, the headmistress at Cheltenham Ladies College where Sinclair had spent one year in 1881, as part of an attempt to arrest her crisis of faith. “Green will help you to see the unity underlying all possibility of knowledge,” consoles Beale in a letter, trusting that the gulf from philosophical to spiritual monism would be less cavernous than that to unquestioning belief from agnosticism.¹⁶ Sinclair’s response does not survive, but her first major essay, “The Ethical and Religious Import of Idealism,” published in the theological journal *The New World* in 1893, is largely an explication of Green’s philosophy, in which she notes approvingly that “Green held a metaphysical principle to be the only possible foundation of ethics.”¹⁷ Sinclair’s logic is apagogic—such systematic unification must indicate an Ultimate Reality, because it is impossible for it to be otherwise. Suzanne Raitt observes in her biography of Sinclair that “[i]dealist philosophy seemed to offer [her] a number of ways to continue to believe in some form of transcendence without . . . abandoning her belief in reason as a means of knowing the world” (*May Sinclair*, 30).

A consistently skeptical thinker, however, Sinclair was not naïve concerning the challenges posed to idealism by the emerging “analytic” philosophy. She was well versed in vitalism, pragmatism, and what she called “the new atomistic Realism”—which reasserted the independence of consciousness and its object—all of which, she saw, posed significant questions about transcendental metaphysics and the defense thereof being mounted at the time by figures such as J. B. S. Haldane and J. M. E. McTaggart.¹⁸ In her own *Defence of Idealism*, Sinclair conceded that a demolition of “subjective idealism,” which asserts that the world’s existence is completely dependent on consciousness, was relatively simple, by virtue of its solipsism; the claim that the only direct objects of our knowledge or experience are mental ones, and that nothing can exist beyond our capacity to know or experience it, is hard to substantiate. Sinclair is “obliged to dismiss all à priori arguments for Monism as worthless, so long as they remained unsupported by actual experience, and so long as they left whole tracts of experience out of their account” (*Defence of Idealism*, 294). Other aspects, particularly concerning “objective idealism,” which maintains only that thoughts or ideas are *more* real than any other existence, she considered more durable, “so far as they explain experience, and so far as experience corroborates them” (294). Sinclair was, moreover, insistent that idealism satisfactorily answered questions that other doctrines did not; *A Defence of Idealism* is, as Johnson has discussed, for the most part an analysis of various late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century philosophies—Samuel Butler’s pan-psychism, Henri Bergson’s vitalism, William James’s pragmatism, and Bertrand Russell’s realism—explaining why they fail to account for evolution or basic facts of human psychology such as relationships, morality, or the will to live (*Dynamic Psychology*, 110–12). Her arguments for “the hypothesis of a self or soul as the unique ground of the unity of consciousness” were lucid, cogent, and highly respected: Russell, A. N. Whitehead, and J. H. Muirhead, in spite of their differing epistemological outlooks, all wrote appreciatively about her work (*Defence of Idealism*, 109).¹⁹

Sinclair did not, in fact, see any inherent disparity between objective idealism and other more pluralist philosophies, as a “hypothetical monist” explains in *A Defence of Idealism*:

This multiplicity and change that you find in the universe I also find. There is not one sensible or intelligible fact in the whole collection to which I should refuse the name of reality, provided it be understood that not one of these is the Reality I am looking for. There is no sort of necessity to go out and look for multiplicity and change when you have got them all around you. I want to know what, if anything, lies behind or at the bottom of multiplicity and change. . . . I ask you how there *can* be multiplicity without something that multiplies itself, or change without something that persists throughout change. . . . It is that, that without the unchanging One, the many and the changing cannot *be*. (306)

The discrepancies were all due, Sinclair claims, to a miscommunication hinging on definitions of reality. What the realists take to be reality is to idealists simply an appearance of it; while the realist arguments regarding “multiplicity and change” are persuasive, they in turn do not take sufficient account of principles of unity: “if this Self or Spirit

100 is to be conscious of the change and multiplicity of its own manifestations, it must be one," she insisted (307). Idealism is anchored in its "idea of the unity of individual consciousness, of the holding together in one synthesis of a multiplicity of states" (25). A pluralistic philosophical realism therefore does not fully recognize the significance of an active individual consciousness; "the self is not passive" in the construction of reality, she states, and thus philosophers must remember that "it multiplies and divides, makes finite and makes infinite and that of all that it scatters it gathers again" (293–94). Idealism leads to a probing of the psyche because in the final analysis it simply seeks that which "lies behind or at the bottom of multiplicity and change" (306).

Sinclair's understanding of idealism, as a result, evidences a more thoroughgoing affinity with the thinking of F. H. Bradley, a student of Green's at Oxford in the 1860s. Bradley's first published work, *The Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874), is a critique of historiographies which assume that they recover and impartially reproduce facts about the past existing antecedent to narrative, just as *Ethical Studies* (1876) attempts to argue that morality is a heuristic, rather than absolute or ideal, construct. Sinclair considers pragmatism to be "a method and not a philosophy," and Bradley has for Sinclair a pragmatic methodology applied to an idealist philosophy; "if he has a fault," she writes, "it is that, in the interests of *his* Absolute, he carries hard-headed, hard-hearted, thorough-paced scepticism to excess" (*Defence of Idealism*, vii, x). *Appearance and Reality* (1893), a secular, anti-rationalistic text, was a crucial component of the fin de siècle's "dismantling of Victorian ideology" and has since been regarded as a seminal work of modernism because of its influence on Eliot.²⁰

Bradley's central claim is that rather than taking rational knowledge as the sole data for philosophical truth, we ought also to consider the role of "experience" or "feeling." "There is," he proposes, "but one Reality, and its being consists in experience."²¹ "Ultimate Reality" (Bradley's term for the universe-as-a-whole, or Absolute) is "the unity in which all things com[e] together," and therefore it must by definition be implicated in the whole of subjective life, because "no feeling or thought, of any kind, can fall outside its limits" (*Appearance and Reality*, 488, 147). In much the same way as Nietzsche and Freud, Bradley diminishes the primacy of Hegelian rationality in favor of a holistic and synthesized model of sentient experience incorporating dynamics of feeling, instinct, and intuition. Sinclair was very responsive to this: she wrote in the margins of her own copy of *Appearance and Reality*, "Sentient experience = Feeling, Thought & Volition."²²

This, however, makes Bradley's notion of the Absolute subtly different from that of many of his fellow idealists. Although broadly speaking a Hegelian, Bradley never uses a dialectical approach, and thus his "Ultimate Reality" is always-already a fullness that can occasionally be experienced by individuals in a partial and transient form. Here is evidence of a markedly mystical aspect to Bradley's thinking—according to Hegelian principles, the nature of noumenal Reality was utterly unknowable as it exists beyond the epistemic boundaries of rational knowledge. Yet Bradley believed not only that we can assert the existence of "Ultimate Reality," but also that it may have some verifiable content that is not beyond the capacity of our experience to catch a fleeting glimpse. It is beyond the capacity of the human mind to totalize or, as he puts it, "construct . . .

in its detail.” Nevertheless, its “main features, to some extent, are within our own experience,” Bradley claims, for “what appears is, and whatever is cannot fall outside the real” (*Appearance and Reality*, 159, 140).²³ Sinclair clarifies in *A Defence of Idealism* that his principle is such that “it confers more reality on appearances than it takes away” and thus concludes that there is “no earthly reason why he should not call himself a Realist, except that the title has already been appropriated by his opponents” (*Defence of Idealism*, 305–6). Appearance, though it should never be mistaken for Reality in and of itself, does partake of some of its qualities. Bradley thus attests that he is “driven to the conclusion that *for me* experience is the same as reality” (*Appearance and Reality*, 145, emphasis added).

Reconfiguring the relationship between appearance and reality in this way implicitly renders any revelatory encounters with “Ultimate Reality” an individually-experienced phenomenon; Reality is supra-individual, but at the same time, Bradley claims, “the real is individual,” too (140). Bradley explains this apparent contradiction by determining that,

All reality must fall within the limits of the given. . . . you are forced back to the “this-mine,” or the “now-felt,” for your subject. Reality appears to lie solely in what is presented and seems not discoverable elsewhere. But the presented, on the other hand, must be the felt “this.” (252)

In other words, we perceive an event or an object in a certain way, and therefore, our understanding of it must correspond to what we perceive, even if that is a fragmented or partial appearance. As A. J. Milne observes, “[i]t is an integral part of his theory that the Absolute is more than human experience. But he insists that it is still experience.”²⁴

The chapters I have quoted from almost exclusively in this summary, “The General Nature of Reality” and “The Absolute and Its Appearances,” are by some distance the most densely marked and annotated in Sinclair’s copy of *Appearance and Reality*. Bradley provided Sinclair with a paradigm of revelation that she could reconcile with empiricism and a transcendent form of Reality that she could verify, however contingently, using individual sense data. Sinclair had persistent concerns about the potential irrelevance of the individual within the supra-individual Absolute: when Bradley writes, for example, that “in the Absolute our whole nature must find satisfaction,” his statement is underlined, and in the margin beside it Sinclair writes “? the individual might not count in the A” (*Appearance and Reality*, 144). Yet Bradley’s version was undoubtedly an improvement on Green, who completely effaced individual experience both in his descriptions of Reality and his social vision of an integrated whole. Bradley formulated a metaphysics which took account of space, time, and materiality, and as a result, rendered “Ultimate Reality” more tangible by positing a form of transcendence which could still affirm man’s spiritual nature by retaining his capacity for contact with the reality beyond appearances through moments of heightened consciousness.

Sinclair’s philosophical background was authoritative; as Johnson states, “no other English novelist could surpass the range or depth of her knowledge of matters philo-

102 sophical and psychological” (*Dynamic Psychology*, 114). But she was also not afraid to synthesize and adapt according to new information; “Sinclair’s commitment to idealism,” continues Johnson, “though not rigid, led her to search out psychological discourses which shed the most light on consciousness, its fringes, and its relation to other levels of awareness” (114). These are the circumstances in which we can see Sinclair beginning to think about metaphysics becoming a matter of psychology in *The Divine Fire*.

“Suddenly reversed engines”: *The Divine Fire*

May Sinclair’s third novel, *The Divine Fire* (1904) jolted her violently into celebrity and the literary mainstream. Her debut, a New Woman novel entitled *Audrey Craven* (1897), had sold respectably and drawn admiration from George Gissing, but *The Divine Fire* was the first to receive widespread success and critical acclaim. The book was received more enthusiastically in the United States than in Britain, where sales were initially muted and reviews noncommittal. Ford Madox Ford, however, remembered that in Philadelphia and New York, “[p]arties were given at which examinations were held as to the speeches of the characters in Miss Sinclair’s book. At others you had to wear about you some attributes suggesting its title.”²⁵ The manager of *Ainslee’s Magazine*, C. C. Vernam, observed that by June 1906, “‘The Divine Fire’ has had a sale of something like 200,000 copies which, of course, has helped to make Miss Sinclair one of the most talked of authors of the day.”²⁶ Observing Sinclair’s astronomical success across the Atlantic, Owen Seaman wrote a brief notice for *Punch* in February 1905, wondering whether the book’s uneven reception was because America “has a vastly wider reading public, and, at times, a keener *flair* for genius.”²⁷ The British literary establishment responded almost immediately to the provocation; sales and reviews increased exponentially.

The story follows Savage Keith Rickman, a poet forced through financial necessity to work in his father’s second-hand bookshop while writing a lyrical drama of artistic genius: he is, in his own words, “the soul of a young Sophocles, battling with that of a—of a junior journalist, in the body of a dissipated little Cockney.”²⁸ Rickman undertakes a commission to catalogue the famously exceptional Harden Library on behalf of minor aristocrat Lucia Harden, aware (while she is not) that her father is bankrupt and the library will shortly be auctioned off to Rickman’s shop. His father, as a result, pressures him to drastically undervalue the collection, but when he falls in love with Lucia, Rickman resigns over what he sees as his complicity and embarks upon a journalistic career in order to earn money to buy back the dissipated library and pay off his “debt of honour” (*Divine Fire*, 458). He then faces an analogous threat to his integrity in the literary marketplace; writing hack pieces for newspapers and journals whose editorial policies prioritize sales over art, Rickman manages to buy back most of the library but nearly starves to death in process.

The Divine Fire is, on one level, a fierce critique of the commercialization of the book trade, resembling one of the fin de siècle’s most prominent realist productions, Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891). Sinclair’s descriptions of Rickman’s penury as a freelance hack

are grittily and uncomfortably convincing, and his travails as a man of uncommercial brilliance in the periodical market are even more soul-destroying than they are for Gissing's Edwin Reardon. What limited modern criticism there is on *The Divine Fire* has largely been preoccupied with identifying the nature and medico-scientific basis of Rickman's genius, and in this regard, the novel does constitute a useful Edwardian counterpoint to *New Grub Street*, where, for all Jasper Milvain's references to "men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force," we never actually see any of them.²⁹ Gissing had died in 1904, which lent the parallel added poignancy.

Yet *The Divine Fire* is also the first novel in which Sinclair attends closely to the category of "Ultimate Reality." Its publication followed immediately upon what Leonard Woolf called the "annus mirabilis" of British philosophy, when New Realism's presence as a serious counter-philosophy to idealism was canonized by Bertrand Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* and G. E. Moore's "The Refutation of Idealism" (1903).³⁰ The characters of *The Divine Fire* "search to preserve a sense of the sacred in the everyday," attempting to mediate the symptoms of an atomized modernity by clinging to abstract universals such as faith, love, and Reality (Raitt, *May Sinclair*, 86). Sinclair read Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* for the first time as she was writing *The Divine Fire* and his philosophy provides the framework for the book; this is the first novel in which Sinclair predicates the consciousness of her characters on what one critic calls her "metaphysical quest" for Reality, the desire "to record the workings of the inner life of man in search of self-integration."³¹ Rickman begins the novel in a condition of self-alienation and the narrative trajectory of *The Divine Fire* is towards unification; he proceeds from book one, "Disjecta Membra Poetae," to book four, "The Man Himself." Idealist philosophy thus begins to modulate towards psychology when attention shifts from the nature of "Ultimate Reality" itself to the conditions of experiencing it, the fusion of "Feeling, Thought & Volition" which, as Sinclair noted, is the prerequisite of "Sentient experience" through which Ultimate Reality can be perceived.

The basic premise of this transference is explained during a debate in *The Divine Fire* between Rickman and Lucia's cousin Horace Jewdwine, literary editor and author of a tract whose title directly alludes to T. H. Green: "Prolegomena to Aesthetics" (*Divine Fire*, 270). Jewdwine is "equipped with the most beautiful metaphysical theory of Art" and runs his periodical, *The Museion*, along rigidly doctrinaire idealist lines; his philosophy is that "[t]o produce Art, the artist's individuality must conform to the Absolute," despite Rickman's protest that genius by definition cannot conform (269, 274). Rickman, in contrast, proposes that in modern art "[w]hat you've got to reckon with is the man himself," the state to which he himself will accede in the fourth book of the novel (275). Jewdwine retorts, "[w]ho wants the man himself? We want the thing itself—the reality, the pure object of art" (275). The "object of art" that Rickman rejects is a dogmatic and predetermined form of creativity as always certain and monolithic, one which forecloses individual perception, intuition, and feeling. Rickman realizes that the true "object of art" lies *within*: it can only emanate from "the man himself." Apperception thus becomes a precondition of perception. Rickman understands that to fully realize and articulate himself, the full expression of his unique individuality, is to discover the true nature of reality, which he can then communicate through his art.

104 Rickman's apperceptive genius enables his moment of transcendent vision when, shortly after beginning his work cataloguing the library at Court House, he walks along the cliffs near Harcombe Hill in Dorset. At first, he struggles "to hear the lyric soul of things"; "it was," the narrator observes, "as if the soul of this land, like the soul of Lucia Harden, had put on a veil" and Rickman can only "stare into the face of Nature, not like a poet whom love makes lyrical, but like a quite ordinary person whom it makes dumb" (111–12). Rickman is on the verge of despair as "the lyric soul of things absolutely refused to sing to him" (112). Compelled to further introspection, he begins to realize the hedonistic nature of the pleasures he pursues as a young man in London—alcohol and an affair with a dancing girl—and only after this insight does Rickman undergo a moment of revelatory quality:

The veil lifted from the face of Nature; and it was a face that he had never yet seen. It had lost that look of mysterious, indefinable reproach. It was is [sic] if the beauty of the land, seeking after the heart that should love it, was appeased and reconciled. He could hear the lyric soul of things most clearly and unmistakably and it was singing a new song. A strange double-burdened, contradictory song. . . . For Nature sings to every poet the song of his own soul. (128–29)

This is a moment of pure clarity, where the "soul of things" is revealed to him in a coalescence of knowing and being; as "the song of his own soul." The nature of Reality is not "known" in the usual sense, but experienced through a state of heightened consciousness synthesizing materiality, time, and space. Rickman's moment of knowledge is of Nature, but this entails a higher knowledge of himself; his recognition within the self of something inextricable from an external unity is a moment of pure knowing doubled as knowledge of that self's own essence. This epiphanic experience forms an instant of communion between subject and an external locus where unity is achieved and the alienation of self-consciousness is momentarily overcome. Early psychologist Henry Myers's theories of genius "held that genius had an advanced capacity to integrate and channel spiritual energies"; Sinclair is more interested in the fault lines emerging from Rickman's psychomachy—the spaces which, it becomes clear, rational consciousness cannot mediate or even comprehend (Johnson, *Dynamic Psychology*, 125).

Recognizing the importance of individually-felt sensation as a way to intuit Reality, Sinclair turns subjective contemplation back in on itself; in *The Divine Fire*, there is a shift from seeing "Ultimate Reality" as the product of a figurative expansion—transcendence of the self—to depicting it by way of the "individualizing tendencies" Michael Levenson observes in broader genealogies of modernism—what could be considered a quintessential "inward turn" (*Genealogy of Modernism*, 15). Through privileged intuitive insight, Sinclair's artist can connect with a realm distinct from the surface of things; he (and in this novel such insight is gendered masculine) can see directly into the core of Reality by means of an experience that is transcendent and simultaneously accesses a secret recess in his own being, a hidden section of the soul. The acts of creation it inspires issue as a mysterious guiding force from what Sinclair would characterize elsewhere in the novel as "the mysterious leading of a profounder

power, of the under-soul that presses the innocent intellect into the services of its own elemental instincts” (*Divine Fire*, 462). The synthesis of philosophy and psychology finds new hidden realities in the space of overlap.

Sinclair’s recourse to “Ultimate Reality” as a concept to envisage the possibility of alternative centers of being is most evident in *The Divine Fire*’s profound interest in liminal spaces and transitional states, circumstances in which the conscious mind is transformed or displaced: drunkenness, grief, love, nervous exhaustion, dreams. When Rickman is living in destitution in a garret off the Tottenham Court Road, for example, saving money to buy back the Harden Library, he undergoes a moment of starvation-induced psychological dislocation:

For now he could write no longer. His whole being revolted against the labour of capturing ideas, of setting words in their right order. The least effort produced some horrible sensation. Now it was of a plunging heart that suddenly reversed engines while his brain shivered with the shock; now of a little white wave that swamped his brain with one pulse of oblivion; now it was a sudden giving way of the floor of consciousness, through which his thoughts dropped downwards, headlong, into the abyss. He had great agony and distress in following their flight. At night, as he lay in bed, watching the feeble, automatic procession of ideas, he noticed that they arrived in an order that was not the order of sanity, that if he took note of the language they clothed themselves in, he found he was listening as it were to the gabble of idiocy or aphasia. (519–20)

The “white wave,” “plunging,” and “puls[ating]” like an electrical charge, is a striking image, more familiar to us now from the writings of Virginia Woolf than supposedly prosaic Edwardian realism.³² Johnson detects, in the image of the engines, an oblique reference to the psychic shock theories of Jean-Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet inspired by nineteenth-century railway accidents, but Sinclair’s metaphor is far more complex than a simple allusion (*Dynamic Psychology*, 124). In this moment of cognitive breakdown, “engines” are “suddenly reversed,” and not simply because Rickman is struggling to grind out his allocated daily quota of words in the manner of Gissing’s Jasper Milvain. The absence of a definite article—“a plunging heart that suddenly reversed engines”—renders the sentence much more convulsive and the meaning more unclear. Identifying “the” engines or “his” engines would help a reader identify more precisely what the metaphor connotes, but the syntactical structure Sinclair chooses leaves the engines suspended in an indeterminate physiological space. While it seems clear that they are not straightforwardly mechanical, are the engines a biological, psychological, or spiritual image? Are the engines even “of” Rickman at all?

This hermeneutic uncertainty is compounded by the next image: the “giving way of the floor of consciousness.” Johnson traces this to the cognitive mapping of early psychologist J. F. Herbart, from whom, he persuasively argues, is derived “much of what appears to be Freudian in Sinclair’s pre-1913 work” (104). Rickman observes the collapse of his conscious mind into a literally sub-conscious layer and remains detached enough to observe the subsequent “procession of ideas” that both belong to him and don’t at the same time. Sinclair would, in the aftermath of World War I, formulate her

106 own tripartite model of subjectivity distinguishing between what she calls “Primary,” “Secondary,” and “Ultimate” consciousness; the first category essentially amounts to the apparatus of phenomenal perception, the second to self-awareness, and the third, transcendence.³³ The tiered schema of consciousness Sinclair “plunges” through allows Rickman to simultaneously feel his experience subjectively and consider it detachedly, as an object, in a version of Janetian dissociation.

These subconscious spaces are not, however, solely the province of nascent “dynamic psychology”; they are also implicit in idealist philosophy. The synthetic forces of genius are of interest to Sinclair for their own sake, as a medico-scientific phenomenon, but genius also serves as a metaphor for the level of intuitive self-awareness required to partake of the idealist Absolute. In Bradley’s philosophy, the moment of encountering “Ultimate Reality” is transitory and of necessity fragmented; it can only ever be a partial glimpse in an instant of time. In achieving our encounter with the Absolute—a moment of unity—therefore, we are also divided; the moment we become conscious of the experience, it disintegrates into its appearances, a realm of artificial categories we deploy to rationalize and comprehend our experiences. Eliot, in his Harvard dissertation, accordingly notes that “Bradley’s Absolute dissolves at a touch into its constituents. . . . Upon inspection, it falls away into the isolated finite experiences out of which it is put together.”³⁴ For Bradley, there must be a purely psychical level of immediate experience consisting simply of feeling, unanalyzed by rational thought and unarticulated by language, which enables access to “Ultimate Reality.”³⁵ As Milne explains, “[a]ccording to Bradley, we are in direct touch with ultimate reality only at the purely psychical level of experience, a level below that of thought. Once we move from the purely psychical level to a level at which thought is operative, we are no longer in direct touch with ultimate reality” (*Social Philosophy*, 179).

Rickman is here encountering not Ultimate Reality itself—a holistic space of permanent and complete satisfaction—but instead a state of doubled consciousness consisting of pure feeling and rational thought through which this Reality *can be experienced*. Bradley himself argued that art provides a unity of felt experience which prefigures the unity of the Absolute, and Rickman here grasps a sense of Reality which is not necessarily *beyond* sensory experience, but is certainly not adequately recorded or expressed by such reductively mechanistic hypotheses about reality or selfhood. The unrelenting deictic “Now . . . now . . . now” of Sinclair’s syntax, insisting on the immediacy of the experience—its occurrence in a single spot of time—while simultaneously galvanizing and propelling the sensation into the next moment, bears similarities again to Woolf’s style. Sinclair, however, is the first novelist to use such a style to depict a level of purely sensory experience. Rickman’s narrative journey to unity is predicated on the discovery of a structure of human experience that encapsulates both conscious and non-conscious being, just as Sinclair’s novel, as I will discuss, centers on the attempt to represent that experience using language. If structures of thought determine structures of reality, as turn-of-the-century philosophy in all of its guises was beginning to accept, then transcending the bounds of rational consciousness applies as much to the conditions of the unconscious as acceding to an abstract realm beyond the material world.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, Sinclair offers in *The Divine Fire* the potential for a transcendent encounter with “Ultimate Reality” to operate as a medium for depicting psychological “reality.” For the most part, Sinclair accepts that human experience is the experience of rational agents—but the wider shift away from rationality at the fin de siècle and the influence in particular of Bradley’s metaphysics coalesce in *The Divine Fire* in Sinclair’s radical exploration of the place of an unconscious level in a holistic paradigm of selfhood.

“Reality itself, pressed on the senses”: Sinclair and Modernism

David Trotter suggests that one of the innovations of Edwardian literature is its attempt to represent “newly apprehended” feelings, and Sinclair is of course not alone as an artist experimenting with representations of consciousness during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras.³⁶ Such experimentation is evident in gothic fiction of the fin de siècle and the Edwardian ghost stories of M. R. James; in the fluid, emotionally evocative imagery of the symbolist poets and the occultism of W. B. Yeats; indeed, in the very existence of the Society for Psychical Research, established in 1882 “to seek proof of these [spiritual] realities by means which would be scientifically acceptable.”³⁷ What united all these disparate ventures was a belief that the externally verifiable was no longer the sole unit of value; the spiritualist revival in fin de siècle and Edwardian culture was one aspect of a growing conviction that true meaning was to be detected by way of submerged, rather than surface, elements and that psychological processes were replacing material reality as a forum for investigation. As Henri Bergson wrote in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), there is “one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time—our self which endures.”³⁸

May Sinclair reveals the implications for representation when she maps this interest in subterranean psychological landscapes onto the terrain of the realist novel; no longer the province of the gothic or the fantastic, nor a savage “heart of darkness” lurking menacingly in the depths of civilized man, the unconscious is for Sinclair simply a constituent component of everyday existence. Sinclair’s fiction is, consequently, full of hidden psychological spaces gesturing at barely discerned impulses. *The Divine Fire* is riveted by characters’ attempts to analyze their own and other characters’ motives; herein lies the significance of the titular “divine” as it echoes through the novel variously as a noun, verb, adjective, and participle, referencing the ways in which characters attempt to “divine” each other. “Unconscious” as the word itself is used in the novel contains many different meanings, though primarily it denotes psychic states and processes of unawareness, which we are “not conscious of.” Sinclair is aware, however, of the extent to which unconsciousness resolves itself into a difficulty of language: for if there is nothing before us but states of consciousness, so unconsciousness is a state whose existence must be inferred from results we *are* conscious of, even if it always silently conditions and determines our experiences. Unconsciousness in this dimension, she admits, “resolves itself into a negative abstraction” (*Defence of Idealism*, 13). The

108 unseen and unacknowledged influences of the “obscurer regions of psychology” on conscious behavior are the prevailing themes of Sinclair’s Edwardian “social problem” novels: a father’s unconscious jealousy of his child (*Mr and Mrs Nevill Tyson* [1898]); the consequences of sexual repression on a marriage (*The Helpmate* [1907]); an ex-courtesan’s internalization of male sexual standards and ambiguously quasi-erotic attachment to her lover’s children (*Kitty Tailleur* [1908]); the importance of sexual drives and their impact on creativity (*The Creators* [1910]) (*The Divine Fire*, 103).

The problem raised by this subject matter—by anchoring an entire aesthetic in an as-yet undefined and inherently inarticulate unconscious—is how to represent what seems by definition to be unrepresentable, and how to signify prelinguistic immediate experience without recourse to language, the definitive tool of rationalized Bradleyan appearances. In *The Divine Fire*, Sinclair manipulates realism so that it becomes a vehicle to move beyond the representation of an externally verifiable referent towards the presentation of a character’s psychological state, shifting from the anchored references of rational consciousness to a drifting realm of pure experience. In nineteenth-century realist novels, there remained still a broad analogy between the thing represented and its signifier, as indicated by its most fundamental referential unit: metonymy.³⁹ Towards the end of the century, however, idealists such as Bradley implicitly took on representational maxims by arguing that meaning—the relations between things—is always metaphoric, making that meaning a mere appearance; Bradley, writes Richard Wollheim, was “amongst the first to insist . . . that to mean something cannot be equated, as the empiricists would, with having an image or representation of that thing.”⁴⁰ In this sense, an idealist tradition organizing reality *a priori* according to spatial and temporal forms the mind itself supplies is critical to the move from representational to abstract art. May Sinclair not only recognized this, but saw its implications and translated them into prose fiction.

The most vivid moment of such stylistic experimentation in *The Divine Fire* comes when Rickman, starving and ill, walks from a friend’s house in Hampstead back to Soho through Regent’s Park:

As he walked he experienced sensations of indescribable delicacy and lightness, he saw ahead of him pellucid golden vistas of metaphysical splendour, he skimmed over fields of elastic air with the ease and ecstasy of a blessed spirit.

When he came in he found that the experience prolonged itself through the early night, even when he lay motionless on his bed staring at the wall. And as he stared it seemed to him that there passed upon the wall clouds upon clouds of exquisite and evanescent colour, and that strange forms appeared and moved upon the clouds. He saw a shoal of fishes (they *were* fishes, radiant, iridescent, gorgeous fishes, with the tails of peacocks); they swam round and round the room just under the cornice, an ever-revolving, ever-floating frieze. He was immensely interested in these decorative hallucinations. His brain seemed to be lifted up, to be iridescent also, to swim round and round with the swimming fishes. (*Divine Fire*, 534)

Rickman's delirium, an almost phantasmagoric mirage, is rendered again in a style resembling—with its shimmering impressionistic indeterminacy, incantatory rhythm, and parenthetical asides—that of Woolf. The rhythmic structure of the passage, repetition with variation centering on the image of clouds and fishes, conveys a circular and overlapping, rather than linear and progressive, sequence of thoughts. The first image we are given is clouds, which instantly mutate to become “clouds . . . of colour.” Then, almost at the same moment, “forms” become “fishes” and when the two ideas refract together in the adjective “iridescent,” which refers first to the imaginary fishes and then Rickman's brain, it becomes impossible to tell what is subject matter and what metaphor.

Defying I. A. Richards's logical model of metaphor, where a sensory image conveys an explicit preconceived meaning, the total effect is not representational but opaque, almost abstract. It is, to frame it in Bradley's terms, “non-relational”—no sooner does a logical relation seem to establish itself than it is defied. The imagery cannot be defined, understood or analyzed in usual conceptual terms; the Christian ichthys seems initially to accord with the novel's broad trajectory of redemption through suffering, but comes into conflict with, to cite just one alternative, the Freudian association of fishes with male genitalia in dream symbolism.⁴¹ The lack of authorial guidance ensures that, instead of referencing a fixed and finite idea arranged by an omniscient narrator, these symbols now gesture through free indirect discourse towards Rickman's pure experience. The conceptual tenor to which the associated elements point is too private, elusive, and enigmatically insentient to be definitively designated. As all these images simultaneously adhere to and remain separate from each other, the reader too must participate in the impossible task of holding incompatible things in mind as part of a “non-relational” whole.

The reason for this semantic shift is that Sinclair is not beginning with a concept before seeking the appropriate textual emblem to embody it; she starts with an image for which the conceptual equivalents (whether figured as Ultimate Reality or the unconscious) do not exist. Immediate experience, for Bradley, provides the only positive idea of the kind of “non-relational unity” one can find in the Absolute. For Sinclair, this is precisely the image of the unconscious, defying the post-Freudian assumption that the unconscious must reside somewhere inside the physiological head. Because the mind's framing of the Absolute represents a synthesis of subject and object, it is possible to experience the Absolute by a mode of experience, whether creative contemplation or hallucinogenic unconsciousness, transcending the moment at which distinctions between subjective and objective, or individual and universal, apply. When these distinctions are transcended, there is nothing to allow us to distinguish between the contents of mind and its objects. Like Walter Pater's music, the condition to which all art aspires, such symbolism is not meant to mean but to *be*.

Sinclair here composes a realist novel partaking of a new and different order of representation, a radically alternative mimetic mode. *The Divine Fire* deploys a symbolism which is beginning to recognize a difference between the description of emotion and its expression, and thus as a novel it straddles two discourses of referentiality: the first,

110 which we associate more readily with realism, predicated on representational links; the other according to a logic of intuited emotional relations more akin to Eliot's later "objective correlative." (Both Sinclair and Eliot, of course, trace the germ of this idea back to F. H. Bradley.) The distinction between the two modes is not, to borrow an explanation from Sinclair's influential biography of Charlotte Brontë, "the difference between reality and unreality," but rather the difference between a "very delicate and faithful" but ultimately inadequate "transcript of reality" and "reality itself, pressed on the senses."⁴² *The Divine Fire* offers the first notable instance of Sinclair appreciating the place of symbol as a way to bridge the gulf between the conscious and the unconscious, thus rendering this early novel a crucial stepping stone on the path to the fiction of modernists such as D. H. Lawrence.

Lawrence, to give a brief example, certainly knew of Sinclair's work; he was forced to abandon "The Sisters" as a draft title for *Women in Love* (1920) because, he wrote to Catherine Carswell in 1916, "May Sinclair having had 'three Sisters' it won't do."⁴³ Miller has traced similarities between the two authors, identifying significant overlaps in style and imagery in the moon chapters of *The Three Sisters* (1914) and *Women in Love* in particular. Sinclair, for her part, was the only British writer other than Arnold Bennett who denounced the suppression of *The Rainbow* in 1915, and wrote in 1924, "I said that the suppression of this book was a crime, the murder of a beautiful thing" (quoted in Raitt, *May Sinclair*, 141). Their common interest in the consequences of sexual repression and incorporation of early psychoanalytic paradigms in the charting of family dynamics is matched by an investment in mysticism and transcendental philosophy, all of which plots their transition from realism to modernism along a broadly similar trajectory in the years surrounding World War I. Yet, where Miller has compared *The Three Sisters* to Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) as "breakthrough novels" whose contributions to literary modernism emerge from their use of symbolism, repressed psychology, and sexual realism, we would do well to remember that Sinclair had already been experimenting with such techniques for a decade.⁴⁴

It must be noted here that Sinclair's formal innovations do not in *The Divine Fire* achieve any kind of sustained treatment, nor does her use of symbolism become a theory of language, as it would for the modernists to come. The bankruptcy of the London bookshop and death of his father provide Rickman with the chance to obtain the Harden library intact, provided he pay the debt which has accrued on its mortgage to ex-journalist financier Richard Pilkington; when Rickman receives his overdue public recognition as a genius-poet he is able to raise the outstanding sum. At his reunion with Lucia, after a long separation, he offers her the library as a "free gift"; refusing at first, Lucia realizes that she can freely offer him her love in return and accepts it.⁴⁵ The ending of the novel is, in other words, conventional and perhaps even slightly mawkish; it certainly seems limited not only in light of the immense potential for stylistic originality signaled within, but also in the broader sociocultural context, where interrogation of the marriage plot as a form of narrative closure had become an important aspect of many Edwardian novels.

Concerted formal experimentation for Sinclair would come after prolonged exposure to Freudian psychoanalytic theory and Imagist poetry. What *The Divine Fire* experiments with in these isolated flashes, *The Three Sisters*—Sinclair's first novel in which, to quote once more from her essay on Richardson, "nothing happens"—renders integral to the fabric of the novel. In *The Three Sisters*, language itself becomes a site of exploration, as the inner life of the three eponymous siblings overlays the outer; it is Sinclair's first novel to be structured by the consciousness of her characters, paving the way for her achievements in formally representing interiority in *Mary Olivier* and *The Life and Death of Harriett Frean*. Sinclair's later novels place the same emphasis on imagery and symbolism as a textual corollary for the unconscious as does *The Divine Fire*, but the prose is much sparser and the texts thus more accomplished overall.

The nexus of psychological realism, modernism, and philosophical idealism with which I opened seems less startling when we realize that idealism provides an opportunity for an author such as Sinclair to imagine, and thus conceptualize, facets of existence beyond life's material façade, a way to negotiate the Edwardian obsession with the slippage between the real and the unreal, the apparent surface of things and the uncharted territories beneath it, which presage modernist formal experimentation. Idealism as Sinclair inherited and interpreted it from Bradley offered a philosophical paradigm for the organization of subjectivity that enabled her to believe that an immaterial realm of abstract forms was compatible with materialist psychology. As writers such as William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) explored the psychological basis for mystical experiences, Sinclair approached the problem from the opposite direction, interrogating the philosophical basis of psychological experiences. When she transmuted these impulses into fiction, she became one of the first writers of the twentieth century to grapple with the existence and representability of the unconscious. Sinclair was therefore not just a direct inheritor of nineteenth-century idealist philosophy, but was also working at the cutting edge of the psychological revolutions of Freud and others.

After 1910, when Sinclair did begin reading psychoanalytic theory and became one of the first authors to incorporate its tenets into fiction, we should recall, as Christine Battersby observes, that she "read Freud and Jung through the tradition of Idealist philosophy that she was familiar with" ("In the Shadow," 105). The example of May Sinclair offers one instance of the risks inherent in perpetuating both a fundamental mischaracterization of the intellectual movements underpinning modernism and the consequent distortion of the literary canon; philosophical idealism's enduring ontological unfashionability should not obscure the extent to which writers of vastly differing aesthetic principles were invested in its subversion of surface materialism, drew upon its expansion of the parameters of psychological research, and furthered its destabilization of the relationship between language and reality. Whenever "[p]sychology was powerless to solve its own problems," Sinclair found it unfailingly "flung us back on Metaphysics" (*Defence of Idealism*, 294). As a result, her novels stand as a unique literary link between and among the immaterialisms of, for example, Pater, Freud, and Bradley, providing a crucial point of correspondence between nineteenth-century intellectual culture and the formal experimentations of literary modernism.

112 **Notes**

1. Michael Bell, "The Metaphysics of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9–32, 18–20.
2. Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 31.
3. See Diane Gillespie, "May Sinclair and the Stream of Consciousness: Metaphors and Metaphysics," *English Literature in Transition 1880–1920* 21 (1978): 134–42.
4. Theophilus E. M. Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973), 36; Penny Brown, "May Sinclair: The Conquered Will," in *The Poison at the Source: The Female Novel of Self-Development in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 11–49, 12; Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 49–50; Hrisey Zegger, *May Sinclair* (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1976), 19–22; and Christine Battersby, "'In the Shadow of His Language': May Sinclair's Portrait of the Artist as Daughter," *New Comparison* 33–34 (2002): 102–20, 106–7.
5. George M. Johnson, *Dynamic Psychology in Modernist British Fiction* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.
6. Robert Caserio, *The Novel in England, 1900–1950: History and Theory* (New York: Twayne, 1999), 18.
7. May Sinclair, "The Miss-May-Sinclair (1907–08)," Literature Boxes/Sinclair, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York, 1.
8. May Sinclair, "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson," *The Egoist* 5, no. 4 (1918): 57–59, 58. The text was reprinted in *The Little Review* 4, no. 12 (1918): 3–11 and as the introduction to Dorothy Richardson, *Pointed Roofs* (New York: Knopf, 1919), v–xix.
9. William James, "The Stream of Thought (1890)," in *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1918), 1:224–290, 1:233.
10. Dorothy Richardson, "Autobiographical Sketch," in *Authors Today and Yesterday*, ed. Stanley J. Kunitz (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1934), 562–64.
11. May Sinclair, "'Prufrock' and Other Observations: A Criticism," *The Little Review* 4, no. 8 (1917): 8–14, 9.
12. Diane Gillespie, "May Sinclair," in *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 436–78, 436.
13. Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 165.
14. Melvin Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T. H. Green and His Age* (1964; rpt., London: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 134; and Thomas Hill Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, ed. A. C. Bradley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), 3.
15. See, specifically, "Chapter II: The Relation of Man, as Intelligence, to the Spiritual Principle in Nature," in *Prolegomena to Ethics*, 59–78.
16. Dorothea Beale to May Sinclair, January 5, 1887, rpt. in Elizabeth Raikes, *Dorothea Beale of Cheltenham* (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), 390.
17. May Sinclair, "The Ethical and Religious Import of Idealism," in *The New World* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin, 1893), 2:694–708, 2:695.
18. May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions* (London: Macmillan, 1917), v.
19. In 1917, after the publication of *A Defence of Idealism*, Sinclair was elected to the Aristotelian Society for the Systematic Study of Philosophy and in 1923, after *The New Idealism* was published, she served on the executive committee along with others including Whitehead. She was the only woman invited by Muirhead to contribute to a collection of essays on *Contemporary British Philosophy*, although, possibly due to illness, she never submitted anything (Boll, *Miss May Sinclair*, 19). She was commended by Russell in his review "Philosophic Idealism at Bay," *Nation and Athenaeum*, August 5, 1922, 625–26. For further information, see Mary Ellen Waithe, *A History of Women Philosophers*, vol. 4, *Contemporary Women Philosophers, 1900–Today* (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 315–20.

20. Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1984; rpt., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 177. For more on Sinclair's relationship with Eliot, see Rebecca Neff, "New Mysticism in the Writings of May Sinclair and T. S. Eliot," *Twentieth Century Literature* 26, no. 1 (1980): 82–108.

21. F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*, 2nd ed. (1893; rpt., London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1897), 455.

22. Sinclair's copy of *Appearance and Reality* is held at the London Library and is the same edition as the one cited in this article. For more information about the fate of Sinclair's personal library, see Charlotte Jones, "May Sinclair at the London Library," The May Sinclair Society, maysinclair society.com/sinclairs-books-on-philosophy/.

23. Sinclair clarifies this argument in *A Defence of Idealism*: "the absolute Reality which is Spirit is its own appearances . . . it confers more reality on appearances than it takes away" (305–06).

24. A. J. Milne, *The Social Philosophy of English Idealism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962), 175.

25. Ford supposedly confessed to Sinclair that he once wore a fireman's helmet to one of these parties, which Sinclair did not take kindly to: "I took her home in a hansom from the house of one of the Garnetts in Highgate to her house in Kensington—a distance, I imagine, of ten miles but seeming a hundred. She refused to speak at all to me after I told her" (Ford Madox Ford, *Return to Yesterday* [1931; rpt., Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1999], 245).

26. Quoted in Michele Troy, "May Sinclair's *The Creators*: High-Cultural Celebrity and a Failed Comedy," *English Literature in Transition 1880–1920* 47, no. 1 (2004): 50–74, 61.

27. Owen Seaman, "Our Booking Office," *Punch*, February 1, 1905, 90.

28. May Sinclair, *The Divine Fire* (1904; rpt., New York: Henry Holt, 1906), 20.

29. See Johnson, *Dynamic Psychology*; Lyn Pykett, introduction to May Sinclair, *The Creators* (London: Continuum, 2004), ix–xxvii; Diana Wallace, "'A Sort of Genius': Love, Art and Classicism in May Sinclair's *The Divine Fire*," in *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern*, ed. Andrew J. Kunka and Michele K. Troy (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 49–64;

and George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (1891; rpt., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9. For a comparison between the two novels, see Kunio Shin, "'Social Solecisms' and Their Discontents: The Politics of British Idealism and Emergent Modernism in the Works of May Sinclair and George Gissing," *Tsuda Review: The Journal of the Department of English Literature, Culture, Language and Communication* 56 (2012): 57–82.

30. Leonard Woolf, *Sowing: An Autobiography of the Years 1880–1904* (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), 133.

31. Rebecca Neff, "May Sinclair's *Uncanny Stories* as Metaphysical Quest," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 26 (1983): 187–91, 187. In *A Defence of Idealism*, written in 1916, Sinclair says "Now in the first copy of *Appearance and Reality* that came into my hands, fifteen years ago" (134). This would date her first reading to around 1901–2, when she was writing *The Divine Fire*.

32. For a fascinating essay on Woolf's encounter with Sinclair's *Pilgrimage* review, with a particular emphasis on how it affects Woolf's reading of the *Ulysses* episode which followed it in *The Little Review*, see Daniel Ferrer, "A Mediated Plunge: From Joyce to Woolf through Richardson and Sinclair," in *Parallaxes: Virginia Woolf Meets James Joyce*, ed. Marco Canani and Sara Sullam (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 25–37.

33. May Sinclair, "Primary and Secondary Consciousness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 23 (1923): 111–20.

34. T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (1964; rpt., New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 200–2. In direct contrast to Sinclair, Eliot is more sympathetic to the sceptical Bradley of the first book of *Appearance and Reality*, who systematically reveals the contradictions of abstract conceptual thought, than to the Bradley of book two, wherein he attempts to reconstruct the world of concrete universals into the real as "Absolute."

35. Bradley, Russell, James, and Whitehead all emphasise the importance of immediate experience, but each understands it slightly differently. See Leemon McHenry, *Whitehead and Bradley: A Comparative Analysis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), especially chapters 2 and 3. For Green, this is a pre-human level as for him human experience begins with thought.

- 114 36. David Trotter, *The English Novel in History, 1895–1920* (London: Routledge, 1993), 3.
37. Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 139.
38. Henri Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (1903; rpt., London: G. P. Putnam, 1913), 9.
39. See, for example, David Lodge, *Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).
40. Richard Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind: Essays and Lectures* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 239. Thomas Carlyle, in *Sartor Resartus* (1836), denies that any symbols are intrinsic, arguing instead that they simply gesture toward a referent. Similarly, when proposing ways in which the Absolute can exist in consciousness but not conceptual thought, Herbert Spencer relies on “symbolic conceptions,” which can be used either as metonymy or an abstract sign “utterly without resemblance” to its subject (Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, 3rd ed. [1862; rpt., London: Williams and Norgate, 1870], 113). Bradley, however, was the first to programatize this: for him, the Absolute approaches the limit of the articulable and thus is completely dependent on metaphor. His work also coincided with the Art for Art’s sake movement which moved to dispense with all pretence of analogy.
41. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (1900; rpt., Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Classics, 1997), 236.
42. May Sinclair, *The Three Brontës* (London: Hutchinson, 1912), 106.
43. Quoted in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence: The First “Women in Love,”* ed. John Worthen and Linden Vasey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xxxi.
44. Jane Eldridge Miller, “May Sinclair and the Priest of Love,” in *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern*, ed. Andrew J. Kunka and Michele K. Troy (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 64–83, 77.
45. On idea of the “gift” and economics of genius and love in *The Divine Fire*, see Raitt, *May Sinclair*, 86–92.